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AUTHOR Rendahl, Stephen E.
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ABSTRACT

Teachers often call upon students to think independently, but may focus on student abilities at the expense of student willingness. The "situational leadership" model of management can successfully develop student independence in organizational communication courses. P. Hersey and K. H. Blanchard, who developed the model, call this independence "maturity," a goal of management. Situational leadership organizes common methods of teaching college courses in organizational communication into a coherent, theory-based pedagogy. At the beginning of the course, the teacher chooses and the teacher explains, while by the end of the course (after four stages) the student chooses and the student explains. Use of the situational leadership model in organizational communication courses not only teaches students about the model, but demonstrates it at the same time. (SG)

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Practicing What We Preach: Using Organizational Theory to Teach Organizational Communication

Stephen E. Rendahl
School of Communication
University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, ND 58202

The author is an Associate Professor at the School of Communication at the University of North Dakota.

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Abstract

The Situational Leadership model of management can successfully develop student independence in organizational communication courses. Situational Leadership organizes common methods of teaching college courses in Organizational Communication into a coherent, theory-based pedagogy.

After observing university life for half a century, a now-retired professor commented that "the University seems impervious to its own knowledge". With all the learning theories, the management theories, the communication theories that academe has fashioned, we have not put together what we know with what we do. Most college teachers teach without having a consistent learning theory, manage without using a management theory, and communicate without having a communication theory. If we chose a model to help us teach or manage or communicate, the model could help us set goals, prescribe behaviors to reach those goals, indicate when we have achieved the goals and help us correct our behavior when we have not achieved what we had hoped.

Independence of thought and action is one of the goals that University teachers desire. If we are to do more than give lip service to that goal, then we need to do more than demand independence. A common classroom comment is "Think independently" which is the converse of the double-bind "Don't be so dependent". We need subtler ways of teaching independence.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly explain how Situational Leadership, a model of organizational management, can be used to teach independence in the classroom. The paper will briefly describe the Situational Leadership model of management and then show how it can be used to teach an advanced organizational communication course.

Maturity and Situational Leadership

The goal of the Situational Leadership management model is to develop employee independence from management. Hersey and Blanchard (1977), the authors of the model, call this independence maturity, a goal of management. Maturity is defined as "the capacity to set high but attainable goals (achievement-motivation), willingness and ability to take responsibility, and [the] education and/or experience of an individual or group" (p. 161). In short, maturity is the willingness and the ability to accomplish a specific task with very little supervision.

College teachers, too, want to develop this kind of

maturity in their students. However, they often retard this development by focusing on the abilities, but not the willingness of their students. The result is that students know how to accomplish the task, but will be damned if they will complete it unless someone forces them to do it. A second way that teachers stunt the development of maturity is to confuse students about their abilities. Since there is an infinite number of tasks, teachers can give the students the impression that their abilities are not good enough until they can complete the infinite number of tasks infinitely well. As soon as they are able to accomplish a task, teachers forget to tell students that they have achieved something important; and immediately, ask them to work on a new task. Often teachers are like critical parents that give a child two shirts. When the child puts on one of them, the critical parent looks disappointed and says "The other one you didn't like?"

Task Maturity

Maturity is task-specific. It is not a general

label to be applied to everything that one does. For instance, one student has the ability to write well and loves to sit down at the typewriter, but he hates to give a speech. In the writing task, he is very mature and needs little help from the teacher, but in the speaking task, he rates low in maturity and needs a specific style of communication to develop that maturity.

So maturity is measured by the degree of willingness and the degree of abilities needed to accomplish a specific task.

Task and Relationship Communication

Each level of maturity, according to the Situational Leadership model, requires a different blend of communication. Managers and employees--and teachers and students--will communicate through two distinct kinds of behavior. Task behavior is defined as the "extent to which leaders are likely to organize and define the roles of the members of their group (followers); to explain what activities each is to do and when, where,

and how tasks are to be accomplished; characterized by endeavoring to establish well-defined patterns of organization, channels of communication, and ways of getting jobs accomplished" (Hersey et. al., 1977, pp. 103-104). Relationship behaviors are defined as the "extent to which leaders are likely to maintain personal relationships between themselves and members of their group (followers) by opening up channels of communication, providing socioemotional support, 'psychological strokes,' and facilitating behaviors" (Hersey et al., 1977, p. 104). To build a relationship, important social pleasant communication is necessary. The blending of task and relationship communication is related to the maturity level of the employee/student.

Low Maturity: High Task-Low Relationship

If a student/employee has low abilities, high task communication is necessary to show how the task can be accomplished. It is easier and less frustrating to tell someone what to do than it is for them to find out

through random actions and punishment for incorrect choices. For instance, a teacher can tell a student the correct form for a report for quicker results with less frustration than if the student simply guessed.

If the student/employee has low willingness, high task communication is necessary to explain expectations. If an employee is not going to be retained, or a student failed or is dropped from the course, high task communication that leaves no uncertainty is necessary.

Low-Moderate Maturity: High Task-High Relationship

If the student/employee becomes more willing but is still unable to accomplish a task, the amount of relationship communication should increase. Since the definition of low-moderate maturity is that the person is willing, but not able, high relationship communication should be blended with high task communication. If a student shows interest through a question or a comment, the response should be warm and supportive and should clearly answer the question.

High Moderate Maturity: Low Task-High Relationship

As the students/employees become more able to accomplish a task but may be unsure of their abilities, the communication should focus on the relationship. Reassurance, friendship, openness and empathy should characterize the communication. Strong task communication is unnecessary. They know what to do, they just don't know that they know. If students are well prepared to give the speech, but are nervous about the presentation, more task communication, the how-to's of speaking are unnecessary, but they need supportive communication to help them know they can complete the task.

High Maturity: Low Task-Low Relationship

As the students/employees become willing and able to accomplish the task, task and relationship communication from the teacher becomes less necessary since students are working confidently on their own.

They have an internal, not external reward for doing their work and will work more independently. They will still require some communication, but not as much, or of the same kind as the low mature student. Towards the end of some courses or in certain independent studies, students have found a topic of interest and they have the research tools to find the answers. The students will work on their own. Very little student-teacher communication is necessary.

Summary

As students become more mature, the nature of communication shifts from a blend of high task, low relationship with increasing amounts of relationship communication until they become mature. There is a low need for either relationship or task communication.

As students become more mature, the responsibility for achieving the goals shifts from teacher to student. In the high task-low relationship communication, the responsibility for success lay with the teacher, but when the students reaches a high level of maturity, the

responsibility for success lies with them, not the instructor.

Situational Leadership in Organizational Communication

The Situational Leadership model can be used to develop an advanced course in organizational communication. The model is adaptable to current methods of teaching organizational communication.

Goals

Applied research in organizational communication or similar independent work is often the focus of an advanced organizational communication course. The students should be able to reach some maturity in studying the communication problems of an organization and in making written and oral presentations based on that research.

Maturity

Each class and every student is different, but the prerequisites placed on the course and the introductory comments during the first class section should indicate the levels of maturity needed for entry into the class. In an advanced organizational communication course, the students should be expected to be able to have moderate maturity in reading, test-taking, writing, speaking and library research skills. Each student should possess the ability to select an organization that can be studied.

Each student will enter with different maturity levels and will progress at their own pace. In large classes it is difficult to adapt the instructor to each individual student so group maturity and group progress must be planned and assessed. Allowances, then, can be made for the individual differences among students.

Course Design

The design of a course is to develop maturity in the study of organizational communication through the

use of task and relationship styles of communication can proceed in a sequence of stages..

Stage One: Low-Maturity, High Task-Low Relationship Communication

In stage one, the instructor sets the goals and the methods of the course and takes the responsibility for helping students achieve them. The instructor chooses the books, sets the course requirements, identifies topics and executes those decisions in the course.

High task communication usually means one-way communication typical of a lecture, readings from texts and testing the ideas of the text and the lectures.

The length of this first stage will vary according to the group of students but could occupy about one-third to one-half of the course. Relationship communication should gradually increase to adapt to the increasing maturity of the students.

As an example of how to proceed in this stage, the instructor might present concepts, models, and methods of analysis so they can see the applications and the

methods of applied research. After a pattern of analysis is presented, students should begin to apply it to their chosen organization. If the topic under consideration is the development of networks, the students should analyze their chosen organization for its pattern of networking. In the beginning, most of the application will be individual work consistent with a high task-low relationship style of communication. As students become more able and willing, some small group application and discussion will be appropriate as a way to increase relationship communication.

Stage Two: Low-Moderate Maturity, High Task-High Relationship Communication

Stage two is characterized by the beginning of student choice, increased interaction between student and teacher, more student-student interaction, and a reduction in traditional student-teacher barriers.

The students should choose a method of research that they can apply to their organization and become more expert in that method. This assignment might

require that students choose a method that has been demonstrated in class, yet do more library research to discover more about the method than has been presented in class. Students at this stage may become more familiar with a particular research method than the instructor. They might write a paper that is similar to a literature review. These activities are intended to increase students abilities with the research task and allow the freedom to choose an approach to the task which might increase their willingness to accomplish the task. (Students are often surprised at how able they are to write the literature review section of the final report if they have completed this paper.)

Small group work can be increased through case studies. And at this point, the instructor should show the pattern of analysis that will be required for the final report. The students should be familiar with the pattern of the final report before they write it, and the case studies should be a dress rehearsal for their report on their organization.

In stage two, the instructor is still directing the course, usually from the front of the room, but

sometimes breaking that barrier--and establishing higher relationship communication--by sitting with student groups and through more individual conversations with students.

Stage Three: High Moderate Maturity, Low Task-High Relationship Communication

Greater equality between student and teacher and more student choice, with the teacher becoming the supporter of the students, rather than the director characterizes stage three.

The class develops consulting teams to help each student analyze their organization. The team members should help the student overcome problems, analyze the data and be a sounding board for discussions. For instance, all of the students that are studying team building in the organization can work as a consulting team to help create a stronger analysis.

The students can lead the team by presenting their review of literature papers and demonstrating how they plan to use their information to analyze their

organization. This moves the student into the role of teacher and moves the other students into the roles of problem solvers. The teacher, being careful not to use too much task oriented communication, becomes the facilitator who helps students realize how much they know.

Stage Four: High Maturity, Low Task-Low Relationship Communication

Minimizing the role of the teacher as either the task master or the charismatic hero-friend characterizes stage four. In Situational Leadership, the greatest compliment to a manager or teacher is that they are not needed any longer. If an instructor has succeeded, students are able to accomplish their task. They have become self-motivated and more willing to tackle similar tasks in the future because they are gaining rewards from other students, themselves or some place other than the instructor.

The instructor of organizational communication should be encouraging students to work for a purpose

other than simply completing the class assignment. Many students will have chosen to study an organization that is interested in their results. The instructor becomes the supporter, and the final papers and presentations in the class become dress rehearsals for their "real" presentations to the people in an organization. Another way to minimize the importance of the instructor's evaluation is to have public presentations on campus or at regional student conventions. A third way is to show how these papers can be used to develop a resume and further the students' careers. Stage four minimizes the importance of the instructor, and helps the students internalize their newly developed willingness and ability to complete tasks.

Summary

In the beginning of a course designed with Situational Leadership in mind, the teacher chooses and the teacher explains. At the end of the course, the students choose and the students explain. The mark of good teaching is not to develop dependency but to make a

teacher useless. The thrill of keeping a student immature is that the instructor can always think that the students need their expertise. The thrill of keeping a student at a moderate level of maturity is that the student always thinks that they need the instructor to keep encouraging them. But the successful instructor, like the successful manager, has become important for their very unimportance. Teachings greatest thrill of all becomes the development of students that are mature, willing and able to complete a given task.

If we can take management theory, in this case Situational Leadership, and apply it to the organizational communication classroom, not only do we teach the students the model but we can demonstrate it as well. If the model is described at the beginning of the course and application to teaching is discussed at the end, the students have the benefit of knowing the theory and seeing its application. We can use the model to teach the model. The result is that the university does not need to be impervious to its own knowledge and students will become more independent in the process.

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